

CRYPTIC CANVASES

CROP CIRCLES OF 2006

Despite the slowest start to England's crop circle season for many years, several masterpieces appeared with stunning features including radiating rectangular boxes and time-tunnel effects.

by Andy Thomas © 2006

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Each year there is a flurry of speculation as to what the next crop circle season will bring, with excitement, anticipation and cynicism in equal amounts as eyes turn to the fields and the stems begin to grow high enough to receive their annual dose of cryptically compressed patterns.

But for long-time aficionados of the English crop circle phenomenon, 2006 began on a worrying note. In any given year, the UK can usually expect to have at least a handful of crop formations in April, but this year it took until 21st May for the first official sighting, only just sneaking inside the post-1980s record of 23rd May 1990 as the latest start. And this first event of 2006 was little to write home about: a rather rough-looking ring in oilseed rape (canola) at Alfriston, East Sussex. Actually, this was the second English event of the year, not the first: that honour went rather dubiously to a man-made logo created for a Wiltshire newspaper (the photo was published on 18th May)—not the greatest opening to a season.

Though the rapeseed fields were late to bloom this spring, there were certainly enough prime canvases for early May formations to have appeared, yet none did. It took weeks for things to pick up. Other countries as far afield as Italy and even Australia (which had the first global formations of the year on 29th March at Conondale, Queensland) seemed to have early activity, but the main circle regions of the UK were strangely quiet until mid-June.

Emails and web postings stirred the circle community, as concerned enthusiasts wondered where their favourite phenomenon had gone and what exactly it was up to. Various explanations were offered concerning the weather, changes in the magnetic fields of the Earth, reluctant ETs...and lazy plankers. Interestingly, many people missed one of the more likely explanations: the water table. It is well recognised that the majority of crop formations cluster around the main aquifers (water-holding geological strata) in the UK, and many believe that natural energy generated by the water contributes to their creation. In 2006, the UK suffered the driest conditions since 1976: could this have been an important factor?

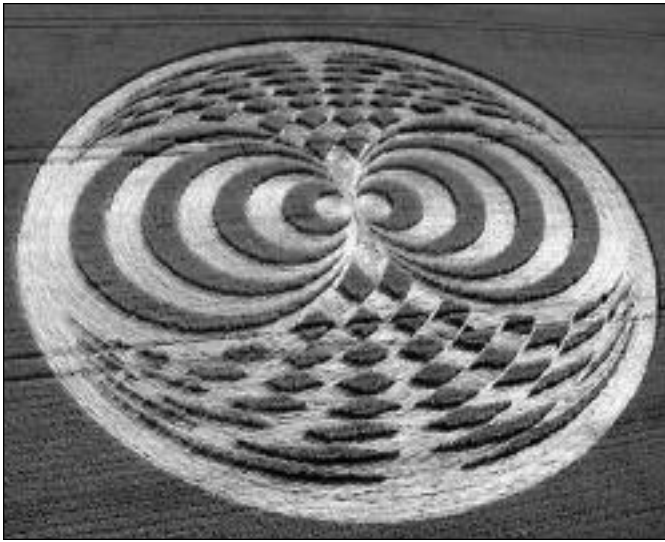
Inevitably, some of the human circlemakers—who would have the world believe that they are the sole creators of the whole mystery—were obliged to proffer their own explanation for the low circle numbers, and news in the spring of the unfortunate suicide of a Wiltshire man who had allegedly helped create a number of patterns over the years (though few had heard of him before his death) provided the excuse they needed. His loss and the apparent low morale which followed were claimed in some quarters as the reason for the lack of circular activity (an interesting change from an earlier credited reason from one planker: "hay fever"). This was not taken particularly seriously in the cerealogical community, but the newspapers leapt on the suicide story late in the day a few months on with a burst of reliably unbalanced press stories appearing in July, screaming that the phenomenon was on its way out and that the morbid demise of a hoaxer was one of the main reasons.

Certain other human circlemakers, however, confusingly dissented from this position; their need to keep the phenomenon's profile high was doubtless stimulated by the forthcoming publication of their circle-debunking book on the "philosophy of human crop circle making". The irony of the claims that the circles were fading rapidly was that by the time these headlines appeared, the numbers of formations, while certainly lower than in many other years, were substantially catching up and the fields were being visited by an array of eclectic and inspiring designs which seemed lost on an ignorant media.

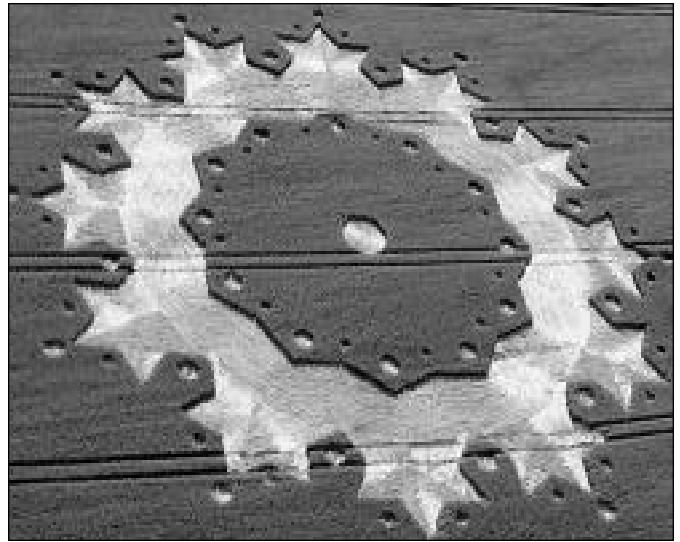
Though the generally less circle-visited counties of Norfolk and Kent had unexpectedly produced a rush of unusual activity in early June, it took until the end of that month for the



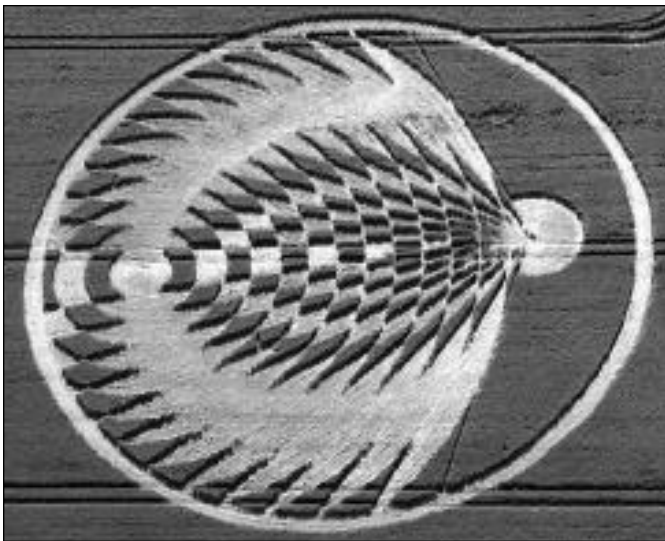
Same formation, different perspectives. Savernake Forest, near Marlborough, Wiltshire.
 Reported 8th July. Image above left: Crop Circle Connector © 2006. Image above right: Lucy Pringle © 2006.



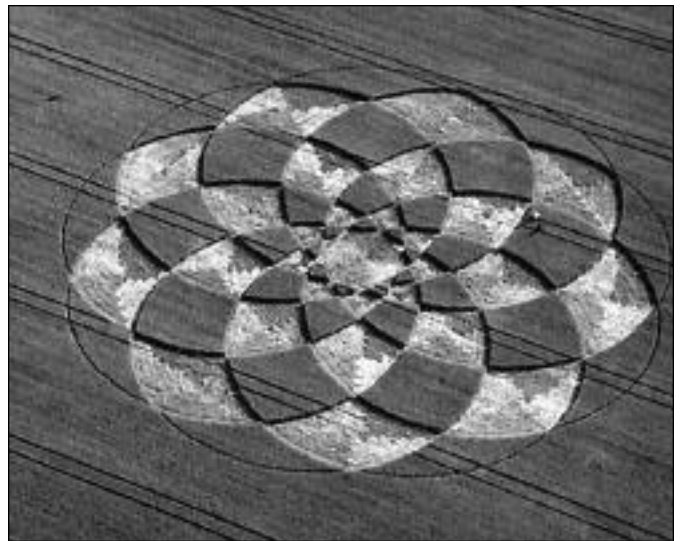
Old Hayward Farm, near Straight Soley, Wiltshire.
 Reported 20th July. Image: Steve Alexander © 2006.



Boxley, near Maidstone, Kent.
 Reported 8th July. Image: Andy Fowlds © 2006.



Uffington Castle, near Ashbury, Oxfordshire.
 Reported 8th June. Image: Crop Circle Connector © 2006.



Rollright Stone Circle, near Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire.
 Reported 2nd July. Image: Lucy Pringle © 2006.

first real masterpiece of the season to emerge. A twin "time tunnel" of radiating off-centre rings at Avebury Trusloe, Wiltshire, on 30th June gave a striking optical illusion effect. It set the theme for a number of formations with similar motifs which would soon follow, most notably at Savernake Forest on 8th July, Aldbourne on 11th July and Straight Soley on 20th July, again all in Wiltshire.

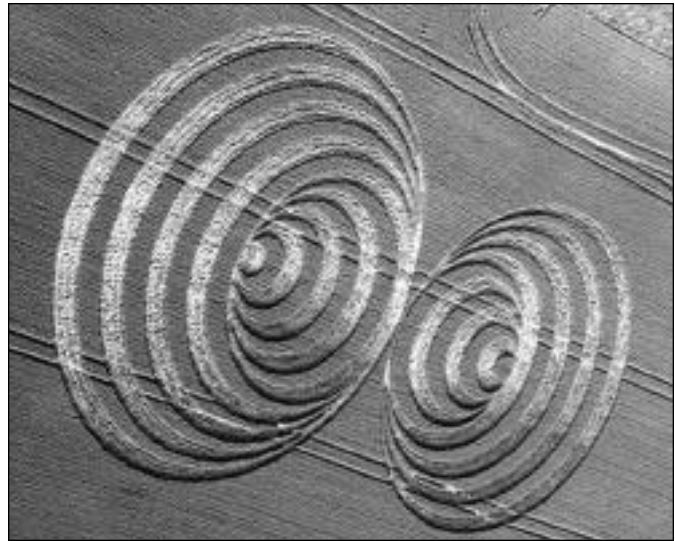
Among several other July entries, three powerful designs all impressively conspired to appear on the one night of 8th July: a "Koch fractal" type of design at Boxley, Kent—probably the finest crop glyph to appear in that county to date; a feathery-looking "dreamcatcher" emblem not far from the famous White Horse chalk carving at Uffington in Oxfordshire; and within a mile of that, at Waylands Smithy (site of the best of the 2005 events), the formation which perhaps most caught the public's imagination this year—an astonishing array of radiating rectangular boxes (seen in perspective) around a jagged central star. Many speculated on the meaning of this very distinctive and unusual symbol, some fearing negative connotations (noting the resemblance to an explosion amongst tower blocks), while others found more inspirational readings. This formation was even reported in the *Daily Mail* (11th July) with awe and interest. How short the memories of newspapers are: just three weeks later, the same paper (29th July) sounded the death knell of the phenomenon with yet another piece on the apparently diminishing returns in the fields.

As the summer drew on, further surprises continued to prove the press wrong. A ninefold floral pattern near the famous Rollright stone circle in Oxfordshire appeared on 2nd July, and the old 1980s circle-haunt of Cheesefoot Head in Hampshire produced a not dissimilar complex ninefold mandala on 23rd July. An unusual design style was explored on 6th August when a huge formation based on non-conventional curves (described by some, contentiously, as "parabolic") arrived at Blowingstone Hill near Kingston Lisle in Oxfordshire (a county which did unusually well for formations this year). This six-pointed affair, with its chequer-board centre, was strange to the eye and impressively difficult to draw. A simpler sequel came down at Etchilhampton in Wiltshire on 15th August—the last English formation at the time of writing.

The future of the phenomenon

The UK had just under 50 crop glyphs this year, about 20 down on the previous season—not as low in number as many have made out, yet still evidence of a general downward trend in recent years. Some of this year's glyphs do evidently stand out as masterpieces. However, it must also be said that it is generally agreed that 2006 was not a vintage year, with some formations being obviously somewhat geometrically challenged and others (a clear representation of a cartoon pig, for instance!) hardly helping the cause of credibility—though it may simply be that reduced numbers of what some might call "the real thing" more clearly expose the remaining human element. Germany, which in recent years has been buoyant with crop formations, seemed to stall similarly. However, there have been disappointing seasons before, only to be followed by renaissance times just a year later, so it is too early to start writing obituaries for the phenomenon just yet: another year will be needed to show the general trend more clearly, especially as collectively, in 2006, crop circle numbers in other countries actually suggested an upward trend. Italy in particular continued its run of ambitious formations, and even France, Belgium, Slovenia and Switzerland, among several other countries, got in on the act.

Some have long speculated whether a year will one day come with few or no circles. If such a notable dearth were ever to happen, this would in itself, of course, be a noteworthy wonder.



Avebury Trusloe, near Beckhampton, Wiltshire.
Reported 30th June. Image: Nick Nicholson © 2006.



New Barn, near Aldbourne, Wiltshire.
Reported 11th July. Image: Crop Circle Connector © 2006.

A lull before a storm, heralding the beginning of something new or marking the completion of a phase? Some wondered at the start of 2006 if this was where things were heading, but later events blurred away the ambiguity.

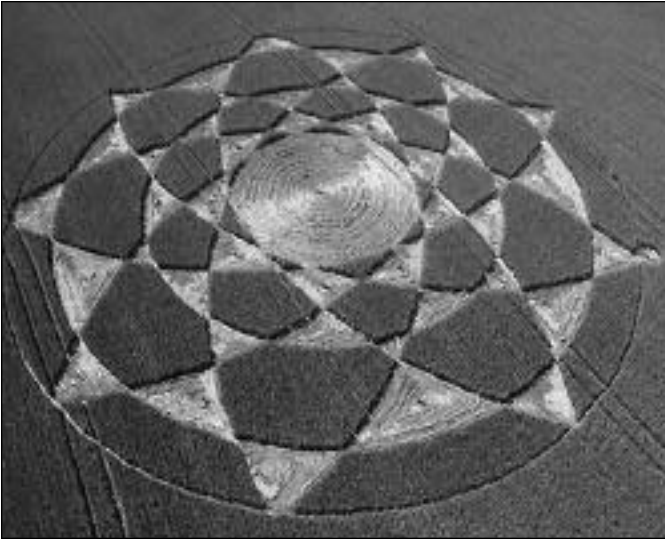
As yet, this mysterious, beautiful and frustrating phenomenon is far from dead. Still no definitive explanations are forthcoming, but its presence and charm remain.

About the Author:

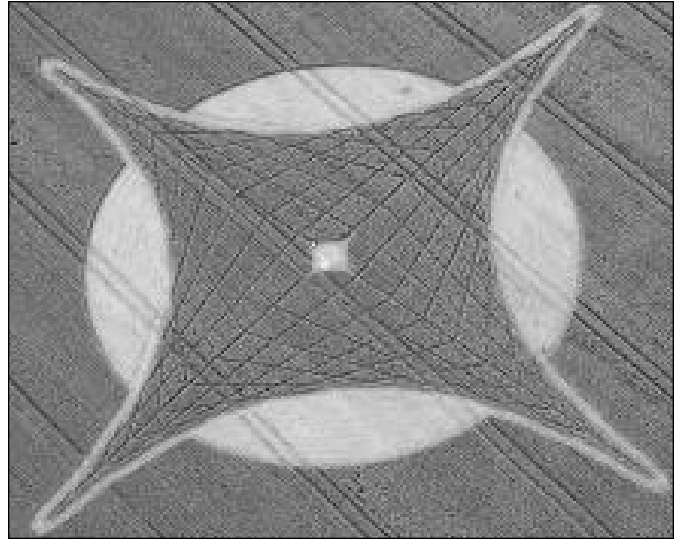
Andy Thomas is one of the world's leading crop circle researchers and is author of five books on the phenomenon including *Vital Signs*, considered by many to be the definitive guide (see <http://www.vitalsignspublishing.co.uk>). Andy is also editor of the influential website <http://www.swirlednews.com>. He can be contacted by email at info@swirlednews.com.

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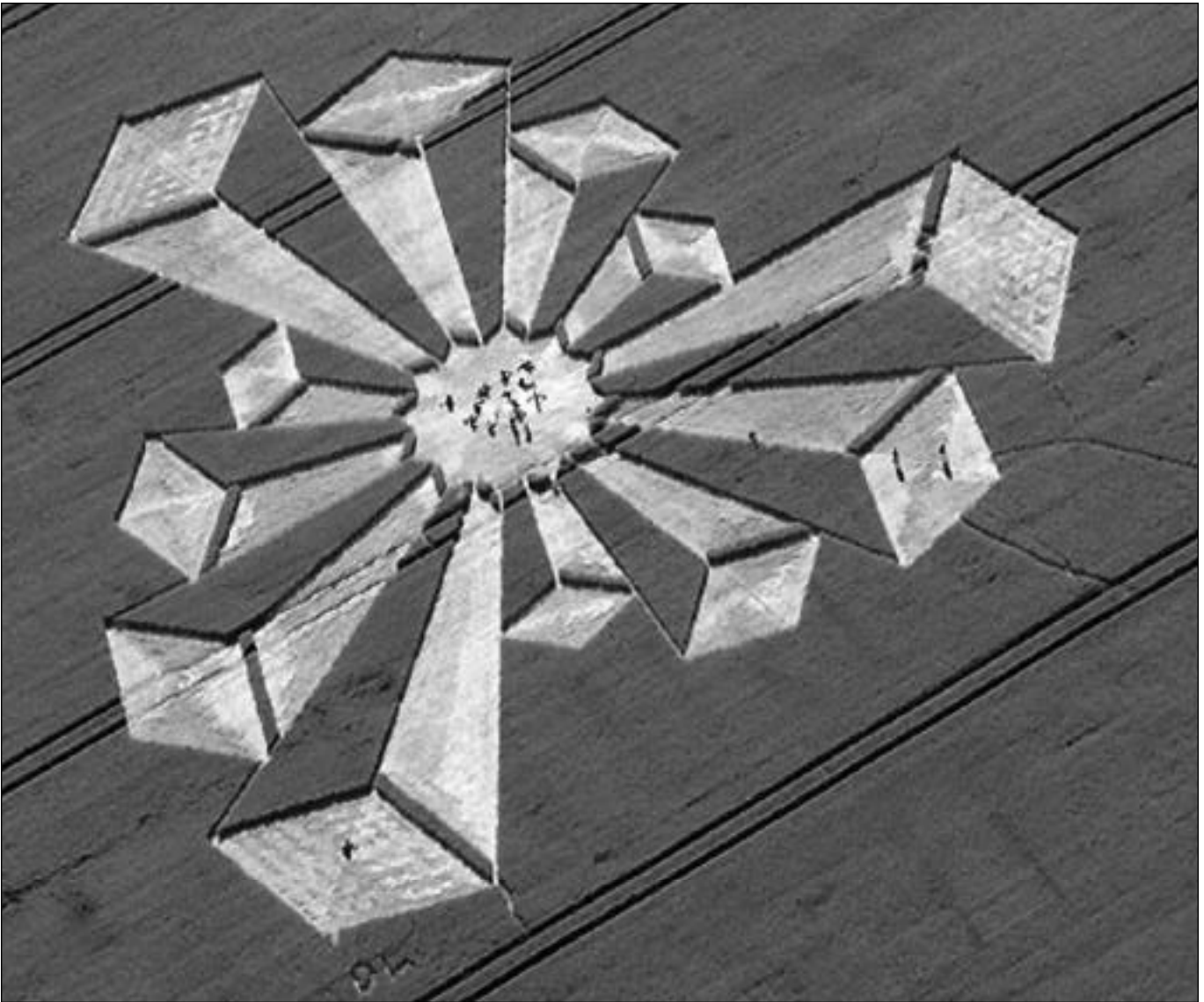
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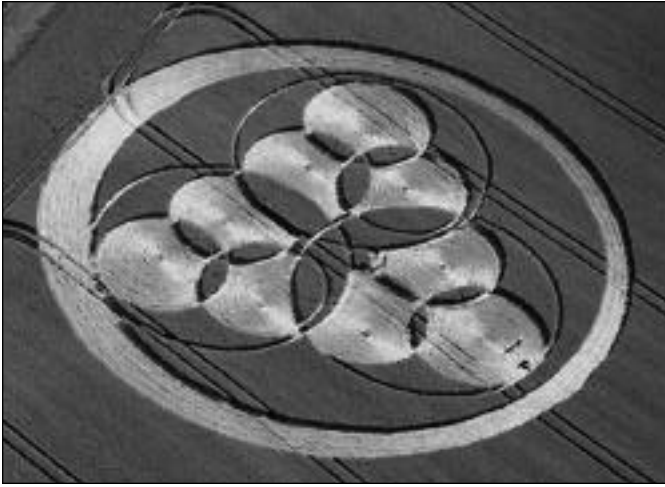
Cheesefoot Head, near Longwood Warren, Hampshire.
Reported 23rd July. Image: Steve Alexander © 2006.



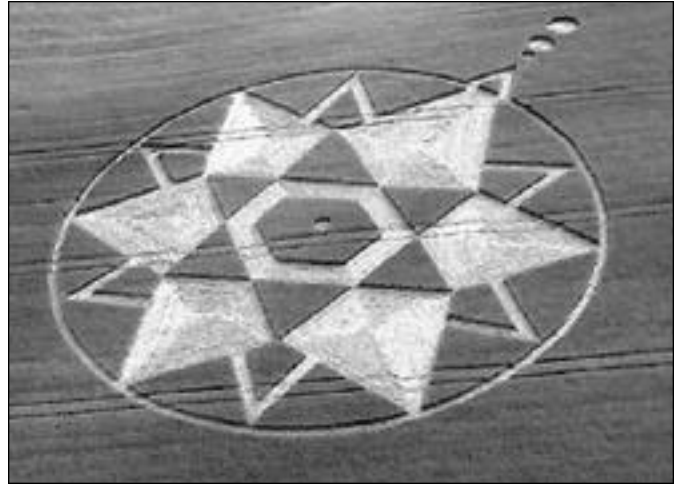
Etchilhampton Hill, near Devizes, Wiltshire.
Reported 15th August. Image: Crop Circle Connector © 2006.



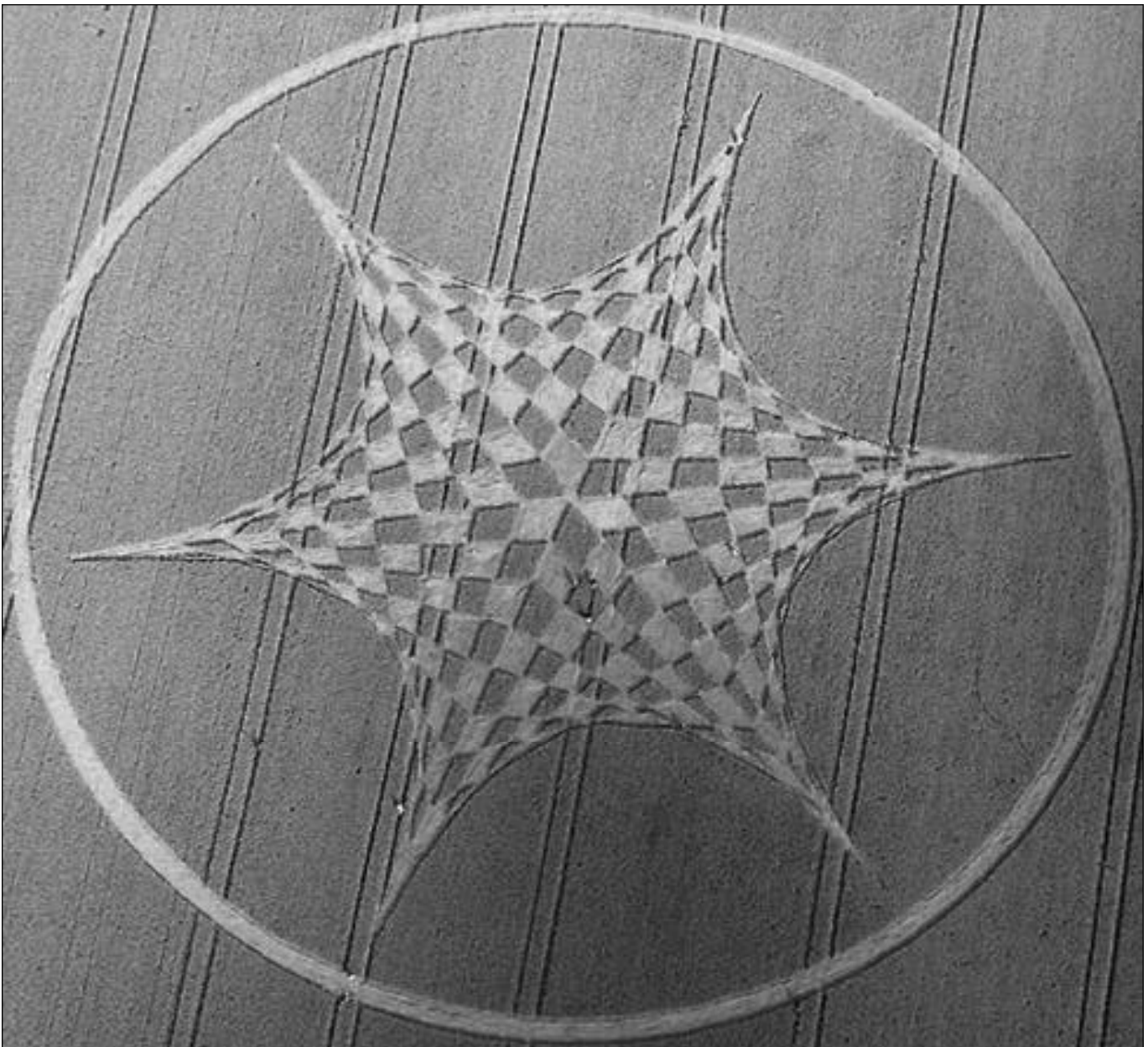
Waylands Smithy, near Ashbury, Oxfordshire. Reported 8th July. Image: Crop Circle Connector © 2006.



Windmill Hill, near Avebury Trusloe, Wiltshire.
Reported 22nd July. Image: Steve Alexander © 2006.



The Pilgrims Way, Burham, near Maidstone, Kent.
Reported 24th June. Image: Andy Fowlds © 2006.



Blowingstone Hill, near Kingston Lisle, Oxfordshire. Reported 6th August. Image: Crop Circle Connector © 2006.